THE WEEK OF PRAYER FOR CHRISTIAN UNITY

Geoffrey Curtis

Priest of the Community of the Resurrection, Mirfield

Foreword by the Right Reverend the Lord Bishop of Oxford

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FOREWORD

THIS pamphlet, together with a companion one (*Some Thoughts on the Universal Prayer for Christian Unity*), has been written by the Rev. Father Curtis, of the Community of the Resurrection, Mirfield, at the request of the Superiors of various Anglican religious communities for men. The pamphlets describe a great and growing movement of prayer for the unity of the Church of Christ, in which many thousands of Roman Catholics, Eastern Orthodox, Anglicans, and members of the Churches of the Reformation, are associated with one another, particularly during the period from January 18th to January 26th every year. The Movement owes its present form to one whom I am proud to regard as a friend, the Abbé Couturier, of Lyons. Its methods are largely his discovery; the formulation of its underlying theological principles—a formulation illuminating in its analysis of the various states of mind which may detract from the perfect submission of our prayers to the will of God which should be their final determinant—is his work. Both the method and the theological basis of the Movement are clearly set out in these pamphlets.

I have no hesitation in commending the pamphlets most warmly to all Christians who recognise the disgrace inherent in our unhappy divisions, and who long to see it erased. I commend them even more warmly to those in whom the present fissiparous character of Christendom engenders neither remorse nor distress. Can anyone say how deeply the disunion active among Christians has wounded the sacred Body of Christ? It is at least possible—for my own part I believe it to be supremely probable—that, if the one visible Church had been able to resist the forces of disintegration which from time to time have broken it into an ever-increasing number of fragments, we should by now have reached a stage of Christian civilisation at which war between the nations would have become unthinkable. From the horrors of total warfare into which we have been plunged, we may see in the vision of a reunited Christendom a healing of the nations which shall put an end to war; and in the strength of that vision we should labour and pray with greater intensity than ever before for the realisation of our Lord's own prayer, *Ut omnes unum sint*—'That they all may be one.'

KENNETH OXON:

OXFORD.
All Souls' Day, 1940.

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Two at first sight mutually contradictory characteristics mark the age in which we are living. On the one hand, the forces of discord, destruction and death have been released with unparalleled fury upon the world, to run riot to issues as yet incalculable. On the other hand, even in the very midst of the storm, we are well aware that among Christians even of the warring nations the forces making for unity and peace, inarticulate though they must needs for the most part be, have never been so strong or so widespread. The paradox which this contrast affords must stir new springs of hope in Christians confronting the world, as they do, with minds trained (through the reading of the Bible) in the Christian interpretation of world history as the field of the action of God ; for we who have learnt from pondering that vast canvas the conviction that God's purposes for the world centre always in His own people —in Israel, His Church, cannot but believe that the true clue to the significance of the age is to be found, not in all its havoc and turmoil and slaughter—in these brute facts envisaged apart, so much as in the movement of the Spirit by which this darkness is shot through and irradiated: the movement by

which throughout the length and breadth of Christendom men are being led to long for, work for, pray for the restoration of unity amongst the scattered disciples of Christ. Hence a chief preoccupation of those who share this awareness is how best to concert and bring into effective play the mighty forces of the Spirit latent in the souls of those who, longing for the union of all men in justice and charity, know that in Christ and in Him alone is to be found the unity of the human race.

The spectacle before us of the 'darkness that covers the earth' seems to call, first of all, for penitence from all Christians for their betrayal of their duty as witnesses to this unity envisaged, proclaimed, prayed for and established in principle, amongst His own, by our Lord. Fearful as they are, physical conflicts between nations and classes and ideologies are but the symbolic reflection of an 'infinite tragedy enacted in the depths'; and chiefly in the depths of the divided will of a defaulting Christendom. We have been indifferent to the sacrilege of the sundering of the Church. We have striven to hide rather than to heal her wounds, or at best to cure them at a level too near the surface. And now we have reaped our reward in our corporate helplessness to heal those of the world for which Christ died. Hence two convictions have been more and more laying hold of awakened Christians the world over. The first is that 'among the manifold disorders of the world none is more tragic than the disunion of the disciples of Christ'—division, that is to say, amongst those who are set to be its light, its salt, its leaven, the sacrament and earnest of its God-meant unity. The

second is that ' inasmuch as the unity of the Church has a supernatural ground and source,' the visible manifestation of that unity cannot be procured by any ' diplomatic accommodation ' that slurs over ' continuing differences of principle '; but that it can only come by action at the deepest level of the Spirit: by a growing interior accord of separated Christians in penitence, reparation, faith, and prayer with the prayer of our Lord Himself ' *that all may be one.*' Christians of all communions, whatever their diversity of belief, can raise from their heart this appeal identical with that made to the Father on the eve of the Passion by the Christ Himself. In this prayer we have a meeting-ground where, under the banner of Charity, the prayers for unity of all true Christians can flow together. Here rising above all the limitations set by ignorance, prejudice, embittering memories, our intercessions converge in the Heart of Christ.

Such prayer founded and centred in a prayer initiated by the Son of God Himself and hence in sure and essential unity with the supplication of the Holy Spirit, will surely bring the fruit the Father desires. One cannot but share the belief expressed by the superiors of the Anglican religious communities of men last year that ' as the prayer of all Christians becomes unanimous with that of Christ, in whom alone is unity, God will hear the voice of His Son resounding through the broken ranks of Christendom, and by ways beyond our present power to discern will restore its visible unity.'

If the duty of Christians in this respect is to be fulfilled, the intercession offered must be no mere

matter of the devotion of individuals valuable though this will always be: it must swell and expand until it becomes the ' immense unanimous cry of all Christian people.' Such a result cannot be obtained unless this universal prayer of Christians, separated here below, but linked through Christ in God, is quickened by a newly-awakened sense of fellowship : best of all will this be done by what have been called ' visible pulsations of prayer recurrent and simultaneous.'

But before we speak of this, one word of caution must be given about the way most quickly discerned for the rousing of this sense of fellowship. The method at once suggests itself that this fellowship should express itself in the gathering together, official or otherwise, of the members of the various Christian communions in united services of intercession. Such a method has certain marked disadvantages. The holding of interdenominational gatherings for this purpose must needs limit the *universality* of Christian action in the way of prayer of which we are going to speak : for in the eyes of many, indeed, of the majority of Christians ardent for unity, such gatherings are suspect as implying or breeding theological indifference. Nevertheless, the way of united action remains open for Christendom as a whole : a way that God has richly blessed—the way of known and public togetherness in intention and time, though not in place. What *is* possible for all without any violation of principle is this : that at one season in every year there shall take place a great and manifestly harmonious intercession of all the people of God, a visible and collective act of

reparation for the great and public scandal of our divisions.

This annually recurrent, collective and (so far as may be) simultaneous act of intercession which seems to be the required prelude and condition of a true change of heart for Christendom in this vital matter, is already in some measure established in the form of the ' Week of Universal Prayer for Christian Unity ' so widely observed in many communions and countries from January 18th-25th. This owed its inception to certain Anglicans who in England and America inaugurated its observance as far back as 1909. In their case this prayer had as its chief intention the corporate reunion of separated bodies with the Roman communion on the basis of full dogmatic agreement. The possibilities of this movement towards united prayer have been for some time obstructed in England by the supposition that those who took part in it were required to agree on certain propositions as to the necessary basis of unity. It was our Roman brethren on the Continent, and notably the Abbé Couturier of Lyons, who released the movement from this requirement and urged the observance of the Octave without reference to points of controversy and in entire freedom as to the manner of keeping it. The realisation that there is given in the Gospel in the supplication uttered by our Lord Himself a bond wholly authoritative and adequate for the unification of the prayer of all Christians without sacrifice of principle, has struck Christians of every denomination with the divine power of a prophetic illumination. Each Christian communion to whom providentially this

appeal to share in the Universal Prayer has come, has been in some measure responsive to the challenge. As a result, the week of prayer has been observed in France, Germany, Rumania, Sweden, Norway, Greece, Poland, Latvia, Manchuria, and in many other parts of the world as well as in the countries of its origin; by Romans, Orthodox, Lutherans, Calvinists, French Protestants, Syrian Christians, as well as by members of all the communions represented at Lambeth. Indeed, it has received far more in the way of authorisation and encouragement from Roman, Orthodox, and Lutheran bishops and from the official leaders of French Protestantism than from the bishops of the Church in which it originated.

It would be impossible for any single observer to sketch the history of the diffusion of this crusade of universal prayer. The Spirit bloweth where it listeth : and the progress of this mighty movement has been less by overt official action than by the hidden agency of the Divine Spirit. This prayer for unity centred simply on the intention of Christ has received wide, understanding and generous-spirited welcome from Continental Roman Catholics. Behind its diffusion within the Roman communion has been the immeasurable power of contemplative communities, some of whom—in particular we might instance the Monks of Unity of Amay—have made Christian unity the foremost intention of their sacrificial life. (Plans for the establishment in England of a monastic foundation with similar interests are now nearing fulfilment.) But apart from this hidden support, the Octave has been publicly celebrated in

Roman churches in Paris, Lyons, Strasbourg, Milan, Brussels, Berlin, Munich, in Poland, Hungary, Ireland, the United States of America, and even in a leper colony in the Pacific. The orthodox monasteries of the Holy Mountain of Mount Athos, who now make the cause of Christian unity matter of daily supplication, intensify their intercession during this week. Many Orthodox metropolitan archbishops have made public their approval of the Octave, and the Council of Russian Bishops of Karlovcy have given it their sanction and encouragement. But Protestant Church leaders also have been in no degree behind their Catholic brethren in their zeal for its propagation. For instance, the Synod of the Reformed Churches of France held at Paris in June, 1936, appealed to pastors of the Union ‘ to join the prayer of the Reformed Church of France ’ at this season ‘ to that of the other fractions of the universal Church.’ The Swedish Archbishop of Upsala, the Bishop of Lund amongst the Lutherans, and a large group of Calvanist Pastors have been among its warm champions.

Certain cities of the Continent have become glowing centres aflame with this fire of unionist charity. At Lyons, for example, in 1939, on every day of the Octave, churches were thronged by suppliant crowds far more fervent and numerous than the most sanguine organiser of the Octave had expected. These crowds listened intently to addresses by eminent theologians on the significance of the Eucharist as the focus and instrument of Christian unity, and joined with heart and soul in the litanies offered. ‘ Beyond our frontiers of language, race

and nationality, unite us, Jesus. Beyond our ignorances, prejudices and hostilities, unite us, Jesus. Beyond our barriers intellectual or cultural, unite us, Jesus.' These litanies were offered in Protestant and Catholic churches alike. Indeed, the Executive Commission of the Lyons Protestant Consistory made an official appeal for special preaching and prayers on this subject during the week, and also called attention to a 'quadruple [wireless] message' on Christian unity broadcast on the Sunday morning by Protestant, Roman Catholic, Orthodox, and Anglican speakers. The Anglican priest who visited Lyons to take his part in this team of four, treasures unforgettable memories of the ardour of Christian fellowship that he found there aglow between Christians of communions that have been more bitterly sundered than those of his own country. To take but one instance, it was deeply impressive to hear of the holding of conferences at a neighbouring Trappist monastery where, in an atmosphere of prayer, Roman Catholics and Protestants gather with the aim of reasserting their fellowship in Christ and of overcoming prejudice and misunderstanding. Both Catholics and Protestants testified to the enrichment and stimulation provided by these meetings. Surely, in view of the centuries of mutual embitterment that have divided Christians in France, such a happening is a precious item among the first-fruits of such universal prayer.

In view of the present state of oppression and distress in which many of the Christian countries of Europe find themselves, a great responsibility seems to fall this year upon the shoulders of English-

speaking Christians to sustain the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity. In facing this task at such a time, we are no doubt aware of very special difficulties in our path—difficulties of apathy and indifference rather than of hatred and asperity. They certainly exist. But are they not so many opportunities for the special glorification of the indefeasible grace of the ' One Man Christ Jesus ' ? God grant that we may not be found to lack a listening ear such as will heed 'What the Spirit saith to the churches.'

G. CURTIS, C.R.

The sentences in inverted commas are taken from the statement issued last year by the Superiors of the Anglican religious communities. The writer is indebted also to the Abbé Couturier, from whose pamphlet "The Universal Prayer of Christians for Christian Unity" much of the information here given has been taken.

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